

NEWS

Backed by data, new Worcester School Committee election districts start to take shape at first public forum



Jeff A. Chamer

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WORCESTER — Stanford professor Nathaniel Persily, an expert brought in to help ensure the six new School Committee election districts are compliant with the consent decree, said that the two majority-minority districts are "probably sufficient," but a decision needs to be made about which data to use to shape them.

Speaking at a public hearing on the new districts Thursday, Persily gave his opinion and advice to the Board of Election Commissioners and the City Clerk on how to ensure the new district lines were compliant with the consent decree.

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"The key question here, just for voting rights purposes, is what statistic is most reliable in predicting whether minorities are going to have an equal opportunity to elect their candidate of choice," Persily said.

As part of the consent decree, two districts will be "majority-minority," meaning that more than 50% of the voting age population of those districts will be Black, Hispanic and Latino combined and the boundaries of the School Committee districts must contain approximately the same number of residents.

"The number of people in each district, not citizens, not voting age population ... that can include people who are not here legally ... those will be equal," Persily said. "The population basis for the plan will be the total number of actual people, according to the census."

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Persily said in order to assess "minority performance," they will need to use Citizen Voting Age Population and Voting Age Population data.

"One of the questions that we're going to have to grapple with is whether we focus, as the plaintiffs did, on the Voting Age Population (VAP), or, as the consent decree requires, the Citizens Voting Age Population (CVAP)," Persily said about drawing the two majority-minority district lines.

CVAP, City Clerk Niko Vangjeli said, is "a statistical survey that the Census Bureau does every five years."

Vangjeli asked whether CVAP data or VAP data was more accurate, in the event that the city is sued again over the maps.

'Unquestionably' more accurate data

Persily said that the VAP data was “unquestionably” more accurate because “every person in the census filled out the data, with VAP being the voting age population.”

He said if they focus only on the VAP data, there is a chance of drawing districts that are heavily "noncitizens" who are ineligible to vote. Despite this, VAP data is still more reliable.

Since the CVAP is a survey, it is not a reliable method for determining School Committee elections as "there's a lot of error just like any other survey that we would do about the city of Worcester," he said.

Persily said the Census Bureau said that the CVAP data is not perfectly reliable because of "COVID and other things."

The two majority-minority districts, drawn by the plaintiffs, will be Districts 1 and 2, according to a letter sent to Persily by lawyers at Brown Rudnick, which was also shared with the public by the Board of Election Commissioners.

District 1 encompasses the Main South neighborhood and surrounding areas extending north and west from the neighborhood, while District 2, directly to the east, encompasses Union Hill and the Canal District as well as Great Brook Valley to the north as well as some neighborhoods on the east side of the city.

Persily said that unless the city goes back to the court to modify the consent decree, CVAP data needs to be used.

"When we incorporate it in this redistricting process, it is the average between 2016 and 2020 ... there's only 2% of households that are surveyed every year and so we have to group them together for those five-year periods, and then use that as the basis for drawing the districts," Persily said.

Vangjeli asked if the plaintiffs would have grounds to challenge the districts lines drawn using CVAP data if they agreed to it, to which Persily said “no.”

He said that districts drawn based on the CVAP data will also be compliant with the VAP data, it's just a question of how much higher than the 50% required by the consent decree.

“If you take a given district that is ... 50% Black plus Hispanic Voting Age Population, that will probably be ... 45% Black plus Hispanic Citizen Voting Age Population because of the number of noncitizens there will be,” Persily said. "If you have a 51% CVAP district ... then it would likely be 55% VAP."

Vangjeli said the new district lines will be implemented by the 2023 municipal election since it is required by the consent decree.

The proposed map contains about 26 split precincts, 17 split districts and 17 different ballot styles, Vangjeli said.

Split districts

Since the City Council has five districts, compared to the six districts the School Committee will have, some Council Districts will be split, leading to different ballot styles.

For example, the currently proposed map shows that voters in District 1 for School Committee will be split between Districts 2, 4 and 5 for City Council.

Chairperson Kimberly Vanderspek said that it could be possible for next-door neighbors to be in the same School Committee district but a different City Council district, which would mean they would have different ballots and would be directed to a different area from each other at the same precinct.

Persily said that the current map is not finalized and that issues, such as fixing precincts that are unnecessarily split, need to be addressed since the map itself would likely be illegal if passed now.

“As well as dealing with population variances, there's also little bits of districts that are cut off from other parts of the districts,” Persily said. “You have to address those kinds of problems. And we will get new census data very soon that I can incorporate.”

Vice Chair Winifred Octave asked how the ballots will change for voters in terms of the number of School Committee candidates who will appear.

Vangjeli said they would vote for three, one candidate in their district and two at-large, rather than six, the current style.

He also provided an update on the proposed 2022 polling locations, saying that they now have to operate "60 precincts with two splits at 62," which is up from 50 due to growth.

After the meeting, Vanderspek said that it was important for people to attend and participate in these meetings so that they will be less confused when the next election using these district lines will be less confusing.

“The City Council and School Committee are not going to be the same. It is going to be very confusing,” Vanderspek said. “The more people who can start to understand that the better off the voting experience will be.”

The next public meeting will be 5:30 p.m. May 26 in the lunchroom of the Worcester Senior Center on 128 Providence St.